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Chère Marie Antoinette,

The Hague,
Jan. 5, '77.

Your letter in answer to my Questions about Life is a good opportunity to go over them once more. Sometimes my questions were not clear, I can see this by the answer you gave.

1. Different people have different characters. Can we speak of a character when each moment ^(of consciousness falls away?) ~~is there~~ not something which stays?

With moment of consciousness I mean simply citta, not sati. (you thought of "moment de lucidité"). The word character is misleading, because it makes us think of a whole and there is not such a whole. Then lobha arises, then dosa arises, then moha arises, then there is perhaps a wholesome moment of consciousness. Each moment is completely different. We all have lobha, dosa and moha and many other vices. We also have moments of wholesomeness but these are very rare, much rarer than one would think at first.

Still, we speak of characters. We find that this person reacts in his own special way when certain events take place, completely different from that person. This person walks and speaks and holds his head in his own specific way, different from anyone else. Why is this so? It has to do with accumulations. Our body, our features are conditioned by kamma. Kamma produces rupas of our body. And also citta conditions our body, the way we walk, eat, speak, etc. We did thus and thus in the past and now at the present we behave in a similar way. We all have lobha, dosa and moha, but it comes out in akusala citta and akusala actions when there are the right conditions for our lobha, dosa and moha to appear. One person is very patient when he has pain, but impatient when he has to wait for someone else. Another person is patient or impatient at different occasions. It depends on one's accumulations. Each citta falls away completely, but still we can see that our ^{and behaviour} inclinations in the past condition our behaviour today. Each inclination, each experience is carried on to the next citta. ^{(Citta} falls away, but it conditions the next citta. That is why accumulations are carried on and we can speak of certain characters of different people.

You write that there is nothing permanent but these processes of citta and the arising and falling away of rūpas. But such a process, can we call it permanent? Nothing which arises because of conditions can be permanent.

You speak about control of your cittas through sati. But even sati is a conditioned phenomenon, can we control it? We would like a lot of sati, and we would like it to last, but who can be master of his mind? We may have had the opportunity to listen to the Dhamma and this again helped us to develop sati and have more wholesome cittas in our life, but even the fact of listening to the Dhamma, did we arrange for it? It just happened, by conditions, did it not? The condition for it had to do with our past kamma. Maybe we listened in the past, how could it otherwise appeal to us today?

Q. 2: Is Buddhism a kind of fatalism? When all our actions are determined by certain factors, how can anything be done to reach perfection?

With fatalism people generally mean something like a higher power which reigns over our life and they

conclude that it makes no sense to cultivate wholesomeness.

In Buddhism we do not guess or speculate about powers which reign our lives, we just develop more knowledge of the present moment. No speculation. In that way we learn to have confidence in wholesomeness. We learn that wholesome moments are different from unwholesome moments, that wisdom is a condition for more wholesomeness in our life. We learn that also wisdom is a conditioned reality, not a self, but, we listened to the Dhamma already, we started to develop sati already and thus we continue. We know that every reality in our life is a conditioned reality, that we have no power over it, but why worry, since there is already a beginning with the development of sati? In fact, when there is mindfulness of the present moment, the question about fatalism does not arise, since this is only a word people talk about. It is not a reality which appears right now. Is the reality now, seeing now, hearing now, not the reality which should be known, in order to understand anything at all about our life?

Q 3. If all we do, even the good we do falls away, does it have sense to develop kusala. Why not just enjoy oneself?

I like your answer very much. You write that kusala gives a satisfaction, different from just pleasure (with lobha) and that one should have experienced this in order to know it. You speak of your confidence in kusala and it helps you not to be afraid for tomorrow, or for other people or for yourself.

You think that when there is more sati there will be less suffering.

It is true, when you have confidence already in kusala you develop it, if you haven't you don't. About this one cannot really discuss, like Mr. X wanted to. You also write: Buddhism is not a system of answers. It does not offer any answer.

You mean, in the way Mr. X was thinking. People ask us questions, logical questions and expect logical answers, but life is not that way. Logical thinking is only a kind of thinking, we have learnt it, we were educated in it. But it does not solve the problems of life. Thinking is only thinking, it cannot change our life at all. Only the direct experience of realities can help us, can change our life. This makes discussing Dhamma so difficult. You write the same about logical thinking as I just wrote above, I see.

Q4. Everybody can make himself believe that he has experienced this or that. How does one know that what one experiences is reality?

Your answer is: when we know that the experience has the effect that it makes us free and gives us equanimity towards all we experience.

This is correct, but , for those who have wisdom developed to a very high degree. Thus, there should be an answer also for us beginners, who have no equanimity, who are not freed yet.

Mr. X had in mind some extraordinary experiences people claim to have in 'meditation' and rightly so, he thinks that people make themselves believe many things. We have to explain to others that the Buddha speaks about very simple things, about realities everybody can experience, directly. We were used to think in terms of 'the absolute truth' or something supernatural. I find it helps people a lot when I explain that the Buddha speaks about seeing, hearing, colour, sound, thinking, aversion, attachment, etc. These are the 'truths' the Buddha speaks about. Everybody can experience these realities. When someone is angry, no doubt about anger. When someone is thinking, no doubt about thinking. When we learn that a more precise knowledge has to be developed there is doubt about: is it nama or rupa, but this is another level of doubt. We have to develop a very precise knowledge, or rather pañña has to be developed. And then we learn the difference between direct experience, and thinking about realities. When there is thinking about realities, you can make yourself believe many things, but if

there can be sati, a reality is directly experienced, there, is no make believe.

5. How can one be sure that one makes oneself fit into Buddhism because one is attached to it. The foregoing also answers this question. Sarah just wrote to me that she receives similar questions all the time. We are so engaged in giving logical answers to their logical questions and we have aversion when we cannot think up a logical answer. We have aversion when people think us dogmatic. we feel lonely. We are attached to what we are saying, Sarah writes. But after a while we get used to all these questions, and we do not mind.

6: about logical thinking, already answered above.

7. Do you have doubts about past lives and future lives?

You answer that you find the present relevant, that sati now matters. One can deduct the past and the future from the present. This is true. There is also another aspect to this: we find it reasonable that there were past lives, how else can you explain many things which happen now. But all this is still reasoning, about, and thus also doubts may arise: is there kamma, is there vipāka? But when sati has been more developed and one clearly knows the difference between nama and rupa, there can be attainment of the second stage of vipassana: knowing by direct experience conditions, thus, then pañña also sees that vipaka now is conditioned by kamma. This is not mere deduction, reasoning, but a much deeper kind of seeing, wisdom knows, no doubt about it. This must be quite different from the reasoning about past lives, future lives, kamma and vipaka we are doing now.

You think that the past is cause and the future is result. We could put it more precisely: good and bad deeds are cause, and they ~~can~~ produce vipāka now, in the form of seeing, hearing and the other sense-impressions. Also some of the bodily phenomena now are conditioned by kamma. (some by citta, some by temperature, some by food). In the past there was kamma and vipāka, so there is now, and so. there will be in the future.

Q. 8. Can one really get to know oneself better through Buddhism?

You answer: we are only processes, mental and material processes, the self is not interesting anymore. This is true. The way to realise that there is no self is the development of a very precise knowledge of these nāmas and rūpas, through right awareness, of the nāma or rūpa which presents itself now. One will also get to know - one's more subtle defilements, and the many moments of akusala. We did not know that before.

Q. 9. What in Buddhism was of immediate help? You answer that there is no soul, and that the 'I' will dissolve in a larger 'Self'. And the discovery of the satisfaction kusala gives you.

There is not a larger self either, we do not speculate or think about kosmos or what will happen to us. Only now: very simple realities which can be experienced now: seeing now, colour now, where is the higher self, the universal self? We cannot experience it. Thus it cannot help us now, now. Always now.

with mettā,
Nina.
